Prince or Princess

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/8315641.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Special Guest Starts: Marlana
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Medieval, Not Historical Medieval just based in it, Explicit Sexual Content, Forced Crossdressing
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2016-10-18 Completed: 2016-10-30 Words: 23,019 Chapters: 10/10

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by orphan_account

Summary

Lady Alana is going to marry prince Hannibal. But the night before she decides to elope with her lover, Lady Margot. This put her family in a desperate situation... one which her stepfather, King Ben, only could solve using a desperate measure.
Will Sir William, the lady's brother, survive the adventure? What will think prince Hannibal of his strange new wife?

Notes

The characters that appear in this story - except those who have never appeared on the tv show or in the novels/films relating to the character of Hannibal Lecter and, therefore, are entirely my invention and property to the development of the plot – don't belong to me. Its creation and rights are owned by Thomas Harris, Bryan Fuller, the NBC Channel and the DeLaurentis company.

- A translation of Príncipe o Princesa by orphan_account

Chapter 1

The day promised to be warm and clear. While the first rays of the sun lighted the camp and the servants and soldiers began the routine to strike it to continue on their way, the old plump maid walked into her lady's tent.

'Milady!' she called as she was entering the private chambers, where the lady slept. 'Milady, it's time to get up. Today is the day. You must get ready...'

When she opened the bed's curtains, she found it empty. More than empty, intact, as if no one had slept there the night before. But her lady had retired to bed early last night because she wanted to be rested for the big day. And she herself had attended they both - Lady Alana and Lady Margot, her lady companion - as they prepared to go to sleep.

The ladies could not have just disappeared, they must be somewhere. Perhaps they have already got up and they were ready to go...

'Milady?' the maid began to look for them around the tent, looking everywhere, even under the bed. 'Milady, where are you? Please, if you're there, say something. ¿Lady Margot? Milady, please, the king will be furious if you don't... appear.'

The woman had reached the privet room in her search. It was a small room inside the tent, where lady Alana could rest or recieve visits. It was also the place where the lady used to enjoy meals in the company of her inseparable lady companion. The place was furnished with a stout oak table surrounded by four chairs and in the background it has been placed a brazier and some ottomans where one could sit and relax, chat or embroidering. In one corner was the lady's harp, abandon and silent.

The old maid took a hand to her chest and twisted a piece of her shirt with apprehension. She swallowed and her face composed a troubled expression: on the table, next to the fruit bowl, there was a pendant. It was a thick royal ring on a golden chain. Her lady would always wore it around her neck. She would have never left it behind, unless...

The abandoned pendant was a bad sign and so understood the maid: something very bad has happened.

'Your Grace! Your Grace!'

The young man's eyes opened suddenly and the boy recognized the wrinkled face of the maid over him.

'Sarah. What are you doing here?'

'Your presence is required at the King's tent, my lord. You must get up. Put on your clothes, hurry.'

'What's going on?' he asked, intrigued, as he pushed the sheets and sat on the edge of the bed to clear his mind. Meanwhile, the old woman had picked up the clothes he leave the night before on a nearby chair and she placed them on his lap in a hurry.

'There is no time for explanations, my lord. His Majesty wants to see you, *ipso facto*.'

'Is Alana okay?' he asked, concerned. The presence of the maiden in his tent was not usual, so this must be related to his sister. 'Has something happened to her?'

Sarah looked at him for a moment, as she pressed her lips and twisted her hands in a nervous gesture.

'I am not allowed to tell you more, milord, I apologize. The king will tell you everything. You must go to his tent immediately.'

The young man got up and knowing that was an important matter he began to dress in haste. He pull on his white and blue tights over his pants and tied it with straps. He put then the leather boots on and over the chemise, he took on the same blue doublet that the night before. Finally, he girt on his sword and took his cloak on his shoulders.

'Now follow me, milord.' said the maid, rushing to leave the tent from behind rather than came out the front as it has been the usual. 'We must be careful: the less people know about this encounter, the better.'

'All this is very strange. Sarah, tell me what happens.'

'I'm afraid I'm not authorized to do so, milord. You'll know everything when his Majesty tell you about it.'

The old woman led him quickly to the main tent, where the king had his chambers. They came in from behind, being very careful not to be seen or heard. King Ben was waiting for them in his private room, already dressed for the trip, hands behind his back, impatient. He turned to them as Sarah announced him their presence by clearing her throat softly. The maid bowed immediately afterwards and left, leaving the two men alone in the tent.

The young Duke entered the room cautiously. The king had normally an imposing presence because he was tall and robust. Now, the rictus of anger on his lips and the steely light in his dark eyes made him even scarier. The boy knew immediately he must be careful.

'Your Majesty, have you sent for me?'

'Do you know what is that?' the king gestured toward a nearby table, where it lay a pendant. But it was not just a pendant, it was the ring with the coat of arms of the royal family of Gallin: King Carl himself had given it to Alana, when her marriage to Prince Hannibal was

arranged. Her sister had not broken away from the jewel since then, seven years ago. 'You know, right?'

The duke looked at the pendant, scowling. Then he looked at the king, giving him a questioning gaze.

'This morning Sarah found it in Alana's tent: it was on the table and your sister was nowhere. She had disappeared.'

'That's impossible. Alana cannot have vanished just like that, your Majesty. She wouldn't leave us that way. You should look for her around the camp...'

'Do you think I haven't done yet?' snorted the king, angry. 'My lieutenant and Sarah have looked for her everywhere and nowhere she is. Your sister and Lady Margot had disappeared... or I should say they have run away.'

The young man looked at the king in surprise. After a moment, he shook his head.

'Your Majesty, excuse me, but that cannot be possible...'

'Do you think I'm making it up!?' the king grabbed the pendant with rage and brandished it before the serious face of the boy. 'What about this then!?' he slammed it against the table. 'It's a message, William: your sister renounces her marriage to Prince Hannibal and stays with Lady Margot. Do you have any idea what that means? Alana had ruin us!' he exclaimed.' I arranged her marriage to a prince, simply because the boy's father likes her. She was going to be a queen, she was going to lead a much richer and powerful country than ours. Your mother and I invested many years and all the resources possible to give her the best education, to make her future husband feel satisfied with the union and proud of her, when the day arrived. We put the fate of the kingdom in her hands and this is how she repay us, running off at the last moment with her lady companion? Ungrateful woman!'

'Your Majesty...'

'A scoundrel, that's what she is! But I can assure you her crime will not go unpunished!'

'Please, you shouldn't condemn her without proof...'

'I have all the proofs I need!' he pierced him with his eyes and the young man was forced to remain silent. 'Don't you try to convince me otherwise because it is very clear. Alana has no possible defense. I have sent my deputy after them and as soon as they will be located, they will be brought to me and they both will be severely punished. Whatever happens, your sister is going to marry Prince Hannibal... and she's going to learn not to challenge her king's authority!'

The duke swallowed, looking away to reflect on the options he and Alana had in those circumstances:

'Your Majesty, please, allow me be the one who find them: being my sister who has committed the offense, I'm obliged to repair her fault...'

'Of course you're going to repair her fault. I sent for you exactly for that reason.'

'Thank you, your Majesty.' he bowed as a farewell. 'I'll set off immediately...'

'You're not going anywhere.' the young man watched him, confused. The king looked at him up and down, calibrating him. The Duke clenched his fists instinctively: his Majesty had done the same the day he and his sister were presented to him on the occasion of his upcoming wedding with their mother and even then he hadn't liked that attitude of contemptuous superiority. 'Don't think I'm stupid, William: Alana is your sister, the only family you have. I cannot put her recovery in your hands. As I said before, I have sent my deputy to look for them. He will take charge of everything.'

'Your Majesty, I beseech you...'

'Your contribution will be different.' the king interrupted him. 'And for your own sake, William, I hope you'll be more loyal and competent than your shameless sister... otherwise, I'll feel compelled to take your word and it will be you, not her, who suffer the punishment for her rebellion. Do I make myself clear, boy?'

'Yes, your Majesty.'

'Well.' he stood before him. The young man stood with his head down, not to prove his submission to the king but to hide what he really thought of him. Revealing his feelings could only lead him to problems, as he well knows from past experiences. 'Listen to me carefully, William. I will explain you what is going to be your role in all this.'

The Duke were silent and listened.

'This is ridiculous.' said the young man, looking himself in the mirror. He looked comical, decidedly ridiculous.

'It's natural that the idea seemed extreme to you.' said Sarah, as she adjusted his cotte. 'But you must obey: these are king's orders. In addition, you should note his Majesty has had to improvise under the circumstances. Lady Alana's elopement has not left us too much room for maneuver, so we must adapt. Today we are expected to reach Gallin's castle and we cannot stand before the king and his son, three hours before the ceremony, without a bride.'

'We could make an excuse.' Will claimed. 'Send a message to the castle saying Alana is sick and the ceremony must be delayed. If everything is ready, what does it matters if we wait a few days more? Can it take the king's deputy a long time to find my sister and Lady Margot?'

'That's the problem, my lord. We don't know how much is going to take Sir Richard find them and we cannot take the risk. King Carl and his son could consider an insult that we make them wait for days for a ceremony that have been agreed years ago. Besides, if the bride

doesn't give signs of life in days they might suspect. His Majesty could find himself in a very tricky situation. He is already immersed in it, in fact.'

'And he will be, as my brother-in-law and his father discover the truth.' he turned in his seat to look angry at the maid. 'They will realize as soon as they'll see me. Do you think something so evident can be just hidden?'

The old woman pursed her lips. She knew the boy was right but what power of decision she had in all this? She was just lady Alana's maid and at the moment neither she nor her mistress have the esteem of their lord, the king. The idea seemed so far-fetched to her as to Sir William but his Majesty was determined and they can only comply with his orders... only the gods know what the king would do to them if they dared to disobey him or to contradict his orders, especially being so furious.

'Don't put your gloves off and they wont be able to see your hands.' she advised him, unsmiling and resigned at the same time. 'Adjust your veil well and nobody will notice the difference. You just must be humble and demure, like a lady. You have seen many of them in Court, so you know how they behave.'

The boy snorted.

'Yes, of course.'

'Don't forget the drinkable, milord.' she pointed to the cup resting on the dressing table. 'It will made your voice softer. Fortunately, this is not as deep as would be expected of a man. That gives us an advantage.'

The Duke pursed his lips and he kept his opinion about all that to himself. He turned to face the mirror again, frustrated. How could have the king concieve such an idea!? Did he really think he could fool King Carl and his son? How he expected them to react when they saw him arrive? They would think it was a bad joke, or worse, an affront to them. His stepfather would be lucky if they were allowed to leave the kingdom alive after such insult.

Sarah brushed his hair and put the band to retire it from his face before putting on the veil. Under this disappeared his brown curls and his neck, hiding conveniently his Adam's apple, which could betray him before anyone who came to see it. Now only was visible a delicate face, youthful, with big blue eyes and a square well marked jaw.

The young man grimaced seeing the result in the mirror. He felt outraged and humiliated. He was a puppet under others' designs on penalty of suffer a harsh punishment if he refused to obey. And meanwhile Sarah hovered around him, smoothing down his dress and powding his face to make his skin seemed smoother and white, feminine.

The maid was doing what was expected of her: turn him into a lady... into lady Alana.

Chapter 2

Around noon, King Carl was waiting in the courtyard of the castle. Half an hour before the watchmen have announced him the arrival of the retinue and it was all prepared to meet his future daughter and her family.

The king looked around, grimacing: Hannibal should be there yet. He had sent a servant to look for him as soon as he received the announce. The wayward prince was delaying his presence on purpose, obviously: that was another sign of his disagreement with the marriage.

Did he really mean to embarrass him, making a snub to his girlfriend and her in-laws...?

'Finally!' the king exclaimed, relieved when he saw his son coming round the corner. The young prince, dressed in black and green clothes, walked carefree as if he had no hurry to reach his destination.

'Good morning, Father.' the prince greeted him with a perfect bow before stood at his side.

'I'm glad you have deigned to appear, Hannibal. I began to think you would not. That would have been a great disappointment to your future wife...'

'She's not my wife and she will not be, unless I decide it.'

King Carl turned to look at him with a grimace at the reminder.

'You think you've been very clever to request a mating ceremony, right? But yours is not cunning, my son, but disobedience: I am your king, besides being your father. You must obey my designs like the rest of my subjects. I chose that wife especially for you. You don't trust my judgment?'

'I trust, father.' he turned to him. 'But I would be infinitely grateful if you had inquire me about the matter first.'

'Princes are not inquired when it's about choose them a wife and you know it very well. Much less you ask his opinion to a thirteen years old boy.'

'That's true. But every citizen of Gallin has the right to choose his partner. It is the law of our people.'

'I gave you a whole year deadline to find someone better than Lady Alana and you didn't.'

'I'm sorry but that's not entirely true: I found a lady but she chose to reject my proposal.'

'Lady Bedelia was sensible: she is twenty years older than you and she cannot bear children.'

'It was not the only reason, father. Lady Bedelia found her wodowhood more advantageous and preferred not to leave it, even to the possibility of being queen.'

'It was better that way.' said the king. He sighed, trying to make him understand. 'Hannibal, the purpose of your marriage is the stability and prosperity of our kingdom. You are a prince. And you're my only heir. You know very well what's your duty to your people.'

'I know. And I don't intend to oppose your designs, father, just get the right wife.'

'Lady Alana seems not right to you?'

'I hardly know her. I have only a portrait of her at eleven. I have not the foggiest idea what she looks like.'

'She's a great lady.' declared his father, annoyed by his stubbornness. 'She's beautiful and intelligent, with excellent manners and she has royal blood.' the king stressed. 'Her mother was Princess Anna Novroba. Do you know how old is her dynasty? Her family is directly descended from the princes of the East. Lady Alana is perfect to rule the kingdom by your side for many reasons. If I thought otherwise, I would not have chosen her.'

'I am aware of it.'

'So give her a chance. That's all I ask you. At least takes advantage of the time you are going to live together, make it worth.'

'It will worth, father. That is the purpose of a mating ceremony: both parties can know each other before deciding whether they formalize their marriage or not.'

'Hopefully.' sighed the king and he looked straight ahead. After a moment his son did the same, with stony face.

They were in silence for several minutes, until they were surprised by the sound of the trumpet in the south turret. Both set their looks then at the gateway, where they soon saw appear the retinue of the kingdom of Westhalt.

'Behave yourself, Hannibal.' ordered the king. 'You know what is expected of you.'

'Yes, father.'

King Ben's entourage consisted of two carriages, several wagons where the food and the frames of the tents were stored, and a large contingent of soldiers. Most of them marched on foot and some did on horseback, accompaning their king.

Eventually they all stopped in a row before king Carl and his son, who was watching them with his lips slightly pursed. King Ben descended from his brown stallion to reach out to them and say hello, as protocol required.

'Glad to see you finally, your Majesty. We was waiting for you.' King Carl greeted him with a smile and a handshake.

'We also were looking forward reaching the castle, your Majesty. My daughter cannot wait to meet the prince.'

'Hannibal neither. Where is the beautiful lady?'

'In the carriage, of course.' King Ben turned and gestured to the servants who traveled with the cart. The footman immediately dropped from the back and proceeded to open the door for the lady to descend.

The three men waited for several seconds, in which only silence and emptiness left the carriage. The prince watched his father and the visiting king with a smile that showed both fun and a natural arrogance.

'Your daughter seems to be such a shy creature, your Majesty.'

'Indeed she is, your Highness. Please, excuse her. Alana!' he raised his voice enough to be heard but not so much that his tone was inappropriate, although it was clear it was an order. 'We are all waiting for you, dear, get out of the cart.'

They saw then appear the lady's reluctant gloved hand. It sought foothold in the arm of the footman and immediately a leather shoe appeared on the step of the carriage. From the cart descended a slender woman, taller than the female average. She wore a pretty pink hopalande with gold edging on the collar and sleeves, sable gloves and a delicate white silk veil which completely covering her neck and head, showing only a fraction of her face from half of the forehead to the chin.

After the lady descended her maid, stocky and old, and it was she who accompained her lady to where her stepfather and her hosts were waiting for her. The lady made no sound nor looked up from the floor during the process.

'Your Majesty, your Highness.' King Ben turned to make introductions. 'My stepdaughter: Lady Alana of Grame.'

'Milady.' the lady and the king greeted each other with a perfect bow. Then, King Carl took her hands affectionately in his. 'Welcome to your home, Alana. It is a pleasure to see you again after so long.'

'Likewise, your Majesty.' her voice was soft, slightly deeper than it was expected in a woman.

'This is your fiance: my son, Prince Hannibal.'

'Your Highness.'

'Milady.' they greeted each other politely. After several seconds of silence, during which the lady didn't raise her eyes from the ground, the prince spoke again: 'Do you like my boots, milady? I have noticed you are incapable of take your eyes off of them.'

He sought to provoke a reaction on her and he got it. While both kings watched him with some consternation because of his comment, Lady Alana finally raised her eyes to look at her fiance with a frown and the most huge beautiful blue eyes. They stood out on her face like gems and her eyelashes were so long and thick that its owner could beat the air with a single

blink. She gave the prince a disapproving look, while towered her head with a peacock pride before answering:

'They are very nice boots, your Highness. Manufacturing is certainly exquisite. But you should take care most of them: the toes are worn.'

'Maybe we should go inside.' proposed King Ben and took her stepdaughter by the arm, while King Carl nodded.

'I asked you to behave, Hannibal.' rebuked King Carl to his son moments after, as they walked a few meters behind their guests into the castle.

'I just wanted to see if there was life in her, father: so far she looked like a rag doll.'

'You're so inconsiderate. You'll apologize to Lady Alana before the end of the day.' he ordered. 'And woe betide you, if I must hear a single complaint from her mouth about your person.'

He left him behind, while the prince grimaced watching his father kindly accompany their guests to the great hall. His future partner walked beside her stepfather, with an unhurried gait which wasn't as delicate as you might expect in a lady. Looking her closely, it seemed to him that her steps had certain martial quality.

'This is going to be interesting.' thought Hannibal, while a sly smile appeared on his face.

His fiancee was decidedly odd. Unusual. From being a sort of lifeless puppet guided by others, she had gone on to prove her voice and temperament... and that stunnin eyes. She had definately aroused his curiosity. Perhaps that union wasn't such a bad idea after all... or at least it could provide him some entertainment during the time their coexistence lasted: the mating ceremony gave them one month minimum and six months maximum to make the decision to formalize their marriage or not. He would have to make good use of those weeks to solve the challenge that the lady, unknowingly, had thrown him.

One thing was clear after their first encounter, something he knew for sure because he had spent five years of his life with her portrait hung on the wall of his bedroom:

Definitely, that woman was not Lady Alana.

Will reached out to take delicately between his fingers a piece of his roast beef and took it to his mouth. He felt uneasy, upset. After his first encounter with Prince Hannibal, and once they were alone in his chambers, his stepfather had coached him to contained his tongue and acted as was expected of a lady. He had been about to answer him right there, angry as he

was, but Sarah had come to the rescue to remind them both of prepare themselves for the ceremony.

Once behind closed doors, the maid had bathed him and perfumed his body with a delicate scent of roses. Then she had polished his hands with pumice stone to remove the calluses left by the sword and had anointed them with one of Alana's creams to soften them, to the point that they almost looked like the hands of a lady: they still were big but they will no longer call the attention or put him in danger of getting caught, hence he wouldn't have to wear the gloves unless he was compelled by cold.

The old woman also used the same cream on his forearms after applying that dreadful ointment - the same she had used in the morning to remove hair from his eyebrows - to remove all the unwanted hair.

'We're lucky you are mostly beardless, my lord.' Sarah said, removing the paste before applying the cream. 'But we must remove any unnecessary hair. If anyone saw these arms during the feast...'

The young man sighed. If the situation did not provoke him so rejection, that would be even funny. It was ironic at least. He had spent most of his life fighting against his effeminate appearance: the slim body, the soft features... the delicate voice that had caused him so much trouble during his childhood and puberty. And suddenly he was required to make use of all that to deceive others. And they covered him with clothes and ointments against his will to eliminate any trace of virility in him, in an effort to turn him into something neither he wasn't nor want to be.

But that was not the worst, of course. They had already succeeded in the hardest part: made King Carl and his son believe he was Lady Alana. Thus the mating ceremony has been celebrated that afternoon – it was not very different from an usual wedding ceremony, actually: done outdoors, with several witnesses and a priestess to bless the place before and the couple after they was say their vows, joining their hands with a red tape to seal the union. Everything was the same except for the votes, the prayers of the priestess and the fact that they were both left hands, not rights, which were joined by the tape - and they only have to continue with the charade until his sister was found and brought as a runaway sheep back to the fold. Meanwhile, he would have to pretend to be a lady for most of the day, even though he didn't know the main female tasks (he can't embroidering or sewing, nor produce jams, soaps or candles, and he had been about to fall off his horse the first time he rode in that infernal saddle. How they managed the ladies to balance on them as the horse was moving? It was inexplicable. So far he had not been aware of how skillful Amazon his sister was until that moment). And he must also endure that his stepfather were always sharp-eyed, watching he didn't to commit any mistakes; Not to mention the annoying Prince Hannibal, who besides being an arrogant he didn't take his eyes off him. He had spent the afternoon watching him, as if he had nothing better to do. His attitude got him nervous. The cheeky bastard had gotten him up for a dance! It was an embarrassing moment because of course he knew the dance moves - his mother had taught him, so has she taught his sister - but he was not used to run the part of the lady. He had managed to get away from that making use of all his mettle...

'Milady.' there he was again. He was sitting opposite and he could not get rid of him. 'You seem upset. Is there anything bothering you?'

He gathered all his patience to watch the prince, trying not to reveal that at that time he was dying to punch someone. Whoever it was.

'No, my lord. I'm just tired. If I could, I would retire to my chambers now.'

'You can do, if it please you. It's totally understandable you're tired after a long trip and several hours of celebration.'

'In that case, with your permission, sir...' he stood and Hannibal followed.

'May I accompany you to your chambers?' he asked, polite. Seeing the look on his face, which Will knew must be at least stupefaction, he added with a reassuring smile: 'Just to the door, milady, to say you good night.'

'Forgive me, milord, but I'm not sure it's the right thing...'

'My daughter is a lady of great modesty, your Highness.' his stepfather intervened, sitting to his right at the table.

'And I intend not to offend her virtue.' the prince excused himself, without losing his determination. 'I assure you I will leave in peace as we came to the door. You have my word, princess.'

Will looked at King Ben and this nodded.

'Agreed.' he yielded, reluctantly. Hannibal walked around the table to offer him his arm and Will put his hand on it to allow him to guide him upstairs. Anything to get out of there.

'I hope you are enjoying Gallin, milady.' Hannibal said after a moment, as they climbed the stone steps.

'It's a lovely place.'

'Are you angry?'

'Do you think I have reason to be, milord?'

Askance he could see Hannibal's smile. The gesture lit up his whole face and it was an attractive one. It would be for him if the prince wasn't so impertinent and conceited...

'Maybe I was a bit rude to you, when we met. I apologize if my behaviour offended you. It was not my intention.'

'Apology accepted, my lord.' his chambers were only a few meters. Just a few steps and... 'Well, here we are. Good nig...'

The prince stole him a kiss treacherously before he could realize. He just leaned forward as if he was going to kiss his hand to say goodbye and instead he placed his lips on his. It was a soft, warm and intimate caress. He was holding his hand while he exploring his mouth in the sweetest way possible, testing his upper lip and then the lower, sucking them slightly and then traveling them down with his tongue, as a promise of something more. The kiss gave Will chills and not a cause of displeasure.

When it was over, the prince released him and stood to observe him with a smile. His reddish-brown eyes scanned his face. He was obviously pleased with his action, almost proud of himself. This was a funny game to him.

Will reacted to his daring with a punch. Hannibal stepped back from the impact, until his back hit the rail. He watched him dumbfounded for a moment, his hand on his cheek where he had been hit. That reaction was not expected.

When Will was aware of what he had done, he looked at his right fist in horror and fled, slamming the door of his chambers behind him, placing it as a barrier between the two. He closed his eyes tightly, cursing his luck. He wished his stepfather had not seen anything, that the party had distracted him because otherwise...

'Good night, my lady.' he heard the Prince's voice of the other side. His tone was not angry, rather satisfied and a little fun. Oh, that scoundrel! 'I hope to see you in the morning.'

'You insolent buffoon!' he shouted at him angrily before he could stop himself.

In response to this, he heard Hannibal's footsteps walked away down the hall: the prince was leaving quiet and, although Will could not see him, also smiling.

Chapter 3

That morning, Prince Hannibal awoke in a good mood. The adventure of the previous day had left him a smile that has not yet faded from his face.

While he tidied and prepared himself to face the day – he was proud of being one of the few nobles capable of get dress without the help of his servants, all by himself - the prince was thinking about what happened during the party: he was satisfied with his progress. After had watched his partner during the party, looking for the why of her rarity, it had taken him only a kiss to find out: his fiancee did not seem quite a lady because she wasn't a lady at all. He was a man. A beautiful young man, he had to admit. The youngster had the pride of a prince and the ferocity of a mongoose when he was angry. He liked him. It would be fun to deal with him.

But he still must clarify some questions: who was the guy? Why they made him to pretend he was a lady? And what had happened to the real lady Alana?

Perhaps she was dead or had escaped. Would she have been able to run away? Maybe, if she considered the mating ceremony as an insult since King Carl himself had arranged the marriage and she was expected to be accepted as a wife and not as just a partner. Perhaps the lady disagreed with her stepfather accepting that condition with such a subservience... that was actually born of necessity: the kingdom of Westhalt wasn't going through its best time in years and as he had been informed, it had accumulated heavy debts with the other kingdoms that king Ben hoped to fill with the commercial and monetary advantages he could obtain from the marriage. It was no wonder he had agreed to the deal. How could he lose such an opportunity? If the mating concluded happily, he would get everything he needed for his kingdom and it wasn't like he have a lot more options, so... he had to take the risk.

That partly answered the second question but others were still in the air. After leaving the charming Sir Mongoose to rest, he had returned to the party to wheedle King Ben: he had questioned him about Lady Alana, pretending to be interested in his future wife and in return he had obtained the words he hoped from the king: apparently his partner did not have any notable defect and she had many great virtues. Of course, she was more than willing to please him and be a wife to him... although the itchiness on his right cheek made him doubt that.

He smiled, amused at the memory. Anyway it didn't matter because during the conversation the king and he had reached an interesting point: after several glasses of wine it had come up the name of Sir William, Lady Alana's twin brother. At first Sir William was to attend the ceremony but at the last minute he had been forced to return to Westhalt to address an important issue for the kingdom. The brother was an active and proud young man, a little bit temperamental. He liked to ride through the woods and caring for hunting dogs. He excelled in the art of fishing and felt a sinful attraction to cherry jam... besides all this, he also kept an obvious physical resemblance to his sister.

Could be Sir William who was hiding behind the guise of a lady? It was the most logical choice and he hoped to find out but not before having a little fun. What was the point in

figure out so soon? It took away all the intrigue. His mysterious partner had so much potential... if he continued fascinating him that way at the end of the month, perhaps he decided to formalize his marriage to him and allow Lady Alana remained into oblivion.

Perhaps it was the right thing. At the end of the day, who said that at the time the lady was not happy anywhere? Perhaps with someone else? If so, he wished her the best. He had never intended to marry her. So if everyone got what they wanted, whatever it was, what did it matter? Thus everyone wins.

He finished fitting his tunic and girded his sword before heading out the door. The new day began and a part of him was dying to get back to see his little angry mongoose.

'My lord, the prince, here it comes.'

'Dammit.'

Will was sitting on a bench in the garden in the company of Sarah and he visibly stiffened in his seat when the elderly maid quietly warned him of Hannibal's presence.

His Highness came toward them, smiling and handsome, dressed in a pearl grey robe and purple tights. Under the sunlight he highlighted perky and very tall. Will felt his stomach squirming when the young man stood before them.

'Good morning, my lady.' he bowed. 'You find rested?'

Again that mocking tone in his voice. Will pursed his lips, containing his irritation.

'As much as it's necessary, my lord.'

'We looked for you this morning but I was informed you were busy overseeing the castle's domestic affairs with Rodrick, the royal butler.'

'That's true.'

'You work hard at your duties, that speaks well of you.' he approved.

'Being your partner that's what is expected of me, my lord.'

'Indeed.' he was silent for a moment before speaking again: 'I really wanted to see you again, milady. I've missed you since our last meeting.'

'Really?' Will clasped his hands in his lap at the reminder.

'Would you like to take a walk with me?' he offered him his arm. 'Since we must know each other better during this period, I think it would be good idea to start with a stroll. I'd like to show you our garden, my lady: it is large and very beautiful. I wish you see it in its fullness before the snow covers it completely within a few weeks. Your maid can come with us.'

'Of course.' he stood up, knowing that there was no escape. He took the prince by the arm and they walked together through the garden, while Sarah followed them at a safe distance.

After a while, the prince broke the silence between the two again:

'You impressed me last night, my lady... favorably, of course.'

'Did I? Instead you gave me an awful impression, milord.' Will replied, after a pause. 'Your behaviour was entirely inappropriate. And although I should be repent for punch you, you must know I'm not.'

'So much nasty was our farewell to you?' they stopped, while Will looked at the prince with a frown and this watched him with an adorable smile. 'I apologize if my innocent kiss offended your modesty, milady. It was not my intention.'

'It was *exactly* your intention. Do you think I don't realize?' he snorted. 'You stole me a kiss like a common thief cat.'

'Do you think I look like a cat?' he asked, raising his eyebrows. The funny expression on his face enlivened Will's temperament and forced him to answer bluntly:

'Yes: you are cunning and capricious and even your movements are those of a wily cat. I swear sometimes I don't know if I should talk to you or caress you on my lap, my lord.' he mocked angrily.

'The second thing I would like much more, my lady.'

'Oh, really?' they had stopped in front of one of the benches and Will, losing his patience, took a seat on one extreme and looked at the prince, daring him. 'Well, let's do this. Sarah, sit down.'

The old woman looked at him, amazed and horrified. She gave the prince a confused look before obeying because she was a simple maid and she could do nothing but obey the orders of her master.

'Are you serious?' Hannibal asked, surprised and attracted at the same time by the idea.

'Don't you wish to be stroked like a cat, milord?' he challenge him. 'I am offering you my lap.'

'And I accept it, milady.' he lay face up on the bench, indeed with the swiftness of a cat. He looked at the lady's face with a broad smile. 'You must know there could not be a happiest cat...'

'Cats doesn't talk.' Will interrupted him, placing an exasperated hand over his brown hair.

'Can I meow at least?'

'No. I find it annoying.'

'Then I'll purr instead.' promised Hannibal and he proceeded to do it.

Will pursed his lips and beared the situation as he could. He just wanted to make the prince shut up, to give him tit for tat and made him to leave him alone. That whole situation - and especially Hannibal - had proved to be...

'Insufferable! Totally insufferable!'

'Milord, please, calm down.' the maid tried to pacify him, closing the bedroom door behind her. 'The prince was just playing with you.'

'That was not a play, Sarah, that was torture: that man is happy to put me in situations that make me feel upset.'

'And you are playing along with him.'

'What?'

'My lord, I have seen you.' the old woman frowned. 'Stroking him on your lap, as if he were a domestic cat? Definitely you have provoked him.'

'He was asking for it.' Will replied angrily.

'This cannot go on like this. You must behave and master your temper. The prince certainly likes games and he's having fun with you while he decide if he turn you into his wife or not.'

'I will never be his wife: Alana will take my place... as soon as possible, I hope. I'd hate to spend my whole life with Hannibal.'

'Well, I think you are doing it very well, sir.' Sarah said and gave him a meaningful look. 'No doubt the prince is happy with you, one can see it in his eyes. The way he looks at you...' she shook her head. 'Be careful, my lord: more strolls like that and you both will end up in bed... I'm sure you know what I mean.'

'I know perfectly what you mean.' Will huffed.

He walked a few steps away from the old woman, turning his back on her. He'd never admit it to anyone but Sarah was right. He had also noticed the way Hannibal looked at him most of the time, when he was not having fun at his expenses, of course. He had enough experience

to clearly identify the various forms of flirtation... and his mother had explained to him and Alana the courtship's rules as part of their education, so he was aware of the situation.

Everything would be much more bearable if Hannibal was not so exasperating. But what exactly exasperated him about the prince? The fact that he were playing with him, of course. It filled his patience that the prince took lightly a situation which was so serious... although, in his defense, it could be argue that Hannibal was not aware of how tricky the issue was actually: the prince thought he was courting his mate not his brother-in-law, who had been compelled to supplant his sister.

And that was not the worst.

He wanted Hannibal. He drove him up the wall but he wanted him anyway. He was trying to contain the feelings the prince aroused in him and the fact that he made him angry so often helped but he was not as blind or stupid enough as to deny the reality: if they had met each other in other circumstances, if that was a different situation and after a kiss like last night... it would not have taken them two seconds to end up in his bed. It was obvious they both wanted it. But they could not fulfill that desire because the mating ceremony's rules prevented them from doing it: If they consummated the marriage at some point during the courtship, they would have to formalize their union and it wasn't convenient for him or his stepfather.

Who knows how Hannibal would react if he discovered the deception? He certainly would feel cheated, angry, mocked. What if he told his father? King Carl would not accept such an insult and the consequences for them - and for all the kingdom of Westhalt - would be very hard, he was sure. One didn't roll the dice with a kingdom that was richer and were much better armed.

The price to pay for their failures would be the disaster. Therefore they could not get out of the agreement. They were bound hand and foot. They must hold out until Alana came back. His sister must return to occupy her place... as soon as possible.

Chapter 4

Sir Richard had been following the fugitives' tracks for several days. It was surprising that two women on foot had managed to avoid for so long an experienced warrior like him but the disadvantages must be taken into account: he was moving on horseback - there were places in the wilderness where a saddle was a hindrance rather than a help - and he didn't knew the terrain well.

The knight stopped his horse as they approached the clearing. He saw the red symbols painted on the bark of trees and knew he had reached his destination.

In the last village he had passed, several miles back, he had requested information about the area and the locals, among other things, had told him of the small community residing there.

The priests – a holy race of women and men - lived in settlements like that all over the world. Their lives were dedicated to service: they took care of nature around them; they exercised as prophets and messengers between gods and mortals; and they practiced medicine with herbs and plants to heal their peers, both inside and outside the community. They helped anyone who needed it and accepted among his people to those who were chosen by the gods.

Sir Richard dismounted and walked over to the clearing where he found a settlement of cottages scattered in a circle, with a large fountain in the center of the square opposite the main building, which was the largest cabin of all. In that cabin were celebrated the rituals and healings and there the gods were worshiped.

The warrior glanced around, looking curiously at the place. As he had been told in the village, the community had lived there for decades and many of their children - children who were born and raised in the community, as Lady Margot - came and went.

He located the garden, three hundred meters west of where he was. There were three young people working the land and he approached to who was closer: a blonde girl with bright eyes who was wearing an apprentice robe. The attire was the same as that of the priests, except for a red embroidered on the heart that stood in contrast with the whiteness of the robe. Apprentices must complete a learning period of a year before become into priests and then they were handed a new robe and were ready to perform their work.

'Can I help you, sir?' politely asked the girl, when she saw him addressing her.

'Good morning.' he greeted her with a respectful nod. 'I'm looking for lady Alana of Grame. Perhaps you've seen her. She's accompanied by lady Margot, one of the community's children.'

'Lady Margot is in the woods with her mother. Lady Alana is there.' she pointed her out. Sir Richard turned and recognized the king's stepdaughter in one of the young people working in the garden. She wore the white robe and was kneeling on the ground, collecting carrots.
'Alana!'

The lady looked up when she heard the calling. She watched the soldier with a serene expression, as if his presence there wouldn't catch her by surprise: she must knew they would come for her.

She stood and went to them.

'Sir Richard.'

'Milady.' he greeted her with a simple bow before watched her in silence for a few moments. Finally he sighed, resigned. 'I can see you have decided to join the community.'

'That's right.' she nodded. 'Margot and I have settled here with her mother and sisters. The ritual of acceptance was yesterday afternoon.'

'I understand. Do you wish I take any message to the king or your brother?'

The lady paused before speaking. In her face there was regret:

'Tell William that I love him and I regret the pain this may have caused him. Tell him where he can find me and that I hope he will be able to visit me someday. He can come to see us whenever he want, the community will be happy to welcome him. As His Majesty...' she grimaced. 'Tell him I'm sorry but we both knew this had to happen. And please, convey my apologies to King Carl and his son. I imagine they must be upset. It was not my intention to disappoint them.'

'I will be your voice to them, my lady. Now, if you'll excuse me: the king ordered me to come back as I concluded my mission.'

'I regret it has been unsuccessful, Sir Richard. Certainly my stepfather sent you to meet us and take us back: he wont be pleasant to know you only have been able to perform his commission partly.'

'I'm afraid he'll have to understand. The circumstances are clear, my lady.'

'Yes, they are.' she nodded, with a determined expression in her face. 'Would you like to rest here, sir' she offered after a pause. 'You seem exhausted and soon it will be dark. We have water and food and you can sleep in one of the cabins. You could spend the night here and leave tomorrow morning.'

The warrior could not help the acceptance which was showed in his face: after several days traveling tirelessly, putting everything in his power to carry out the orders of his king, nothing could do better to him that stop and rest and fill his stomach with food and drink... the community was known among other things for its generous hospitality.

Sir Richard nodded without hesitation.

'It will be an honour, milady.'

King Ben was in his chambers, alone after having dismissed the servants and his lieutenant. Now he walked up and down furiously.

He had felt relieved when he has been announced that Sir Richard had arrived at the castle to see him, after nearly a week of having sent him after his stepdaughter and Lady Margot. He thought it would be good news at last but the soldier had brought with him the worst news imaginable.

Alana had joined a priests community. After he had forbidden her! A year earlier, the foolish girl had tried to convince him to relieve her of his marriage to Prince Hannibal because she wished to devote her life to the service... and of course he had refused. What was she thinking about!? If she wanted to serve others, she could do it perfectly being queen consort and fulfilling her duties to her people and husband and saving good people of Westhalt from an ignominious fate. It was the least she could do for the kingdom that welcomed her as a child and had been her home for years. In addition, the marriage had been agreed years ago. Did she mean to throw it all away on a last minute whim?

It was an insult. It wasn't enough for Alana to disobey him and run away like a thief in the middle of the night, placing them all in such a tricky position but she had to do just what he had ordered her not to do. Did that ungrateful woman pleased to mortify them?

If her mother raise her head... Anna was an excellent wife. She had given him two sons before her death, three years ago, and he had never had a single complaint about her in their ten years of marriage. Her death was felt by everyone in the kingdom, as she was always a venerable and demure sovereign.

But the children she had conceived with the Duke...

They should have gotten their bad blood of their father: John of Grame was a powerful and respected nobleman but basically he was just a representative of those savage tribes who once lived beyond the wall. What could be expected of his kind? The daughter was a foolish fractious and the son an arrogant rebel who had the temperament of a wildcat...

Thinking about his stepson, the king stopped. Despite all his flaws, the boy was doing a good job and the charade had given them the time to try to fix that mess. It would be solved yet, if it were not for Alana's last dirty trick. But what could they do about it? Nothing. Still they were bound hand and foot, as at the beginning: only willingly could the young girl leave the community and it was pretty clear she wont go along with it. Nor could they claim or get her out of there by force because they risked suffering the wrath of the gods. They had always protected their priests carefully. Obviously was worse face them that King Carl and his son...

Suddenly, he came up with the idea. It was as if a lightning had stroked him. It was certainly risky but they could make an attempt.

Everyone in the castle was speaking about the prince's new partner and her relationship with him. The lady was known for her dignity and ferocity and they said Prince Hannibal was crazy about her. Many were sure he would make her his wife at the end of the month.

Well. They could take advantage of that.

For now, Will didn't know anything about what he has been told by Sir Richard, whom he had sent back to Westhalt, promising to deliver Alana's message to his stepson for him. But what was more convenient in that situation, speak or keep quiet? He was holding the kind of information that could tip the balance one way or the other. Perhaps he could use Alana's words to lead his stepson by the way he was thinking of?

The situation was delicate and thanks to his stepdaughter it had worsened. However, it did not mean they were finished. Everything would depend on their next steps and how they resulted. They could end up winning or losing everything and yet it worth to take the risk with the new plan that was taking shape in his mind.

He started walking up and down the room again. He must plot his strategy. He must think of what was best for him and his kingdom.

Chapter 5

Will has been at the castle for two weeks. At that time he was in the garden, embroidering while Sarah slept beside him, curled up in a corner of the blanket they had lied on the floor to sit on.

The old woman was tired and after lunch she had been unable to resist taking a nap. It doesn't bother him at all, indeed he was grateful to spend a few hours in silence.

The last few weeks had been busy for him: he had had to adapt himself to a lot of chores he didn't know but should undertake in his role as the prince's partner. Even without being queen - and although Rodrick was an excellent steward, for whose work and virtues should be thankful he and the king - everyone expected he was some day and it would have been very suspicious and negative for his image if he simply refuse to abide by his duties as a princess.

So he had to work hard and learn in days what any lady learned in years: to embroider, to sew, to ride, to manage and supervise the domestic affairs of the castle... he had become mistress and administrator and the experience had been exhausting but revelatory at the same time: like any gentleman, he knew little about women's work and he had never stopped to think about it in terms of the effort and time entailed and how important was the role of women in the administration of a estate. Everyone assumed what are a lady's duties and no one bothered to look beyond... as if the fact of being something assumed makes it less difficult or important.

Will gave the last stitch in his embroidery, cut the thread with his teeth and let the needle aside before checking out the result. He smiled, satisfied. While he was still taking his first steps in embroidery, he had to admit he wasn't bad at it after all. And the truth was he no longer disliked the task like at first, when he considered it another imposition in a situation which he detested. Over time he had finished appreciating that work craft, which allowed him to relax and stay focused at the same time. It was a nice feeling, so he went to it whenever he could to cope with the stress of his situation. In addition, once satisfied their domestic obligations, nothing else a lady could do during the day apart from walking or riding... and he would prefer a thousand times entertained himself with the needle before get on one of those saddles of torture again. How much he wish he could regain his male saddle and enjoy riding as in the past!

He had not been riding since his last argue with Hannibal. Thinking about it made he smile, remembering mischievously the stupefied and horrified expression on the prince's face when this mistakenly thought he was going to leave him.

They had had a particularly high-profile fight moments before because Hannibal filled him patience with his games and saucy jokes, which were intended precisely to teasing him. Stressed and fed up with his attitude, he had threatened to leave if he did not stop torturing him with his impertinence. He just couldn't take it anymore.

Hannibal had not believed his threat, of course. It was not even true, he had only said this in a fit. But when an hour later someone told the prince his partner was in the courtyard preparing to leave - he only wanted to ride for a while through the woods to calm his anger but the prince did not know it – he thought he really was going to abandon him and literally ran to apologize. He promised to mend his attitude if he stayed and assure him it was not his intention to make him suffer and he wouldn't bother him anymore. He was so sincere in his repentance he could not help but forgive him. Also, he took advantage of his contrition to get a break. Everything was easier for him since he did not have to bear Hannibal's nonsense or fight against the ravages caused by his presence. Finally it was good - and necessary - to put some distance between the two.

Currently, he no longer felt so overwhelmed or depressed and as a result he was in a better mood. Now he could relax and behave more in line with his own personality, which made him be much happier and accessible to others... but he still remained concerned about Alana.

He frowned uneasily: last week he had asked his stepfather if he had heard of Sir Richard and the king had replied his lieutenant had sent him a message informing him he had not been successful in his search and his mission required more time.

Will could not help but wonder: where were Alana and Margot? How was it possible that an experienced explorer like Sir Richard couldn't find them? They could not have gone missing just like that...

His stepfather seemed unwilling to talk much about it, which was understandable considering how upset he was about the whole thing. Maybe he should write personally to Sir Richard to see if there was news about his sister. It had proposed it to King Ben but the monarch had told him it was better to wait. They still had a few weeks until Hannibal made public his decision to take Lady Alana as his wife or not.

But just in case things came to that extent, he had already drawn up a plan: according to the rules of mating ritual, both parties must agree to solemnize the marriage. So if at the end of the month his sister was not there to take his place, he would refuse to seal the deal. They could not carry that charade much further because it would be not only unjust and unnecessary, but Hannibal would notice right away if they celebrate the wedding and to reach the marriage bed he discovered that his lady was not a lady but a knight. Only the gods knew the consequences that would entail, apart from the immediate annulment of the marriage a cause of false identity.

When it will becomes apparent the wedding would not take place, he and his stepfather would leave without revealing the truth, so no one would be damaged except perhaps Hannibal, who seemed to have grown fond of him during those weeks of hectic cohabitation.

'It will happen soon.' he thought, grimacing. 'He will find another lady with whom espouse and forget all this. At the end of the day, it's not as if he had fallen in love and if he did, it will not with me but with Alana, as it is with her with whom he believes he is dealing.'

He pursed his lips, leaving aside his work in disgust. Enough silly thoughts. He must be positive: tomorrow it was his birthday and he finally was going to reach the age of majority. After that, he just have to wait another two weeks and he would be free. Then he could return

to his father's land as he had always wanted and spend there the rest of his life, living as a duke and without having to rely on King Ben or submit to his authority anymore.

That was his design. He was going to carry it out as he find out what had happened with Alana.

The next morning was slightly overcast and cold but not bad for a picnic.

Hannibal had summoned his partner in the yard after sunrise and when the lady arrived, he was standing beside his horses, lady Alana's beautifully caparisoned and wearing a new saddle... a birthday gift from the prince.

The lady had looked at the horse and then at Hannibal, dumbfounded.

'I trust it didn't seem inappropiate to you, milady: In Gallin ladies do not use a different saddle from knights and I could see you seem not very comfortable with your usual mount. Perhaps this new saddle is best for you.'

The lady has rewarded him with a broad smile. The gesture made its way slowly on her face, lighting it up entirely. Hannibal could not remember that his eyes had ever glimpsed something so beautiful. His heart raced and he was glad that his rapprochements finally got good fruit: the lady took him gently by the hand and thanked him for his gift with sweet words, which were the perfect reward for his efforts to please her.

After that, Hannibal helped her to get on her horse and they set off toward the forest to spend a quiet day by the lake. Sarah accompanied them, of course. The faithful maid never separated from her lady and the rules of courtship imposed the presence of a chaperone, so that lovers were not alone... although there were certain exceptions, especially if the lovers were trying to know each other in order to formalize their marriage.

When lunchtime came, the prince made a first step by sending the elderly to pick mushrooms in the woods, not far from them, but enough so that he and his partner could have privacy, as they finished their lunch sitting on a blanket under the shadow of a great oak. The maid had looked at her lady for approval and the lady had let her go with an assent: there was no danger to leave her alone with the prince.

'Tell me about you, my lady.' Hannibal asked, interested, as the old left. 'I want us to know better.'

The lady turned to look at him.

'In that case, your Highness, you also ought to tell me about your life.'

'What do you want to know?'

'What are your hobbies? What kind of things you like to do?' he asked, after a moment's thought.

'I like many things: music, poetry... I practice drawing and riding and I love cooking.'

'Can you cook?' he asked with interest.

Hannibal took the opportunity to expound. He had always been proud of his culinary skills.

'I'm good at cooking. You see, men of my lineage are tought to cook during their training as warriors: there are times when a soldier must prepare his own food and sometimes even feed his peers. It is part of their duties, such as keeping the sword point or take care of their horses.'

'I understand.'

'It's your turn, milady: tell me, how was your life before coming here?'

'Like any lady's life, I guess: my brother and I grew up in Grame, in the land of our father. My mother gave us a good education. Then she married King Ben and we settled in Westhalt. My stepfather promised me in marriage to you when I was eleven and... the rest you know.' she shrugged dismissively. 'There is not much to tell.'

'Don't you have any hobbies?' asked the prince, trying to penetrate the wall of secrecy with which his partner was protecting himself.

'I like the outdoors and riding, like you. I also enjoy music and embroidery.'

'What about fishing?' asked Hannibal. 'There are ladies who like outdoor sports.'

'Yes, I like fishing.'

'I have heard your brother, Sir William, is a talented fisherman.'

'Yes, Will... fishing relaxes him.' she said and looked away for a moment, a gesture of concern that the prince did not go unnoticed.

'It was a pity we couldn't have met. Tell me about him: he is my brother-in-law and we have never seen each other.'

'Well, he has seen your portrait, actually: what your father sent me after arranging our marriage.'

'What did he think about it?'

'He thought you had a regal bearing.' he declared and then a funny smile crossed her lips. 'And you were a little plumper.'

'I was thirteen when I had that portrait painted.' Hannibal fought back, scowling. 'My body was changing.'

'Of course, my lord.'

'In addition, your brother should not comment on that subject.'

'Why not?' he watched him curiously.

'Because I've been told by your stepfather that he feels an unhealthy penchant for cherry jam. Jams fatten much, milady.'

'You shouldn't believe everything my stepfather tell you about him.' replied the lady and her face suddenly turned serious. 'I don't... I mean, my brother liked jam but I assure you that his taste is within the normal levels. In addition, Will has always been slim and athletic: he spends his free time riding and going for a walk with the dogs.'

'So King Ben is wrong about him?'

'King Ben loathes him.'

'Why?' asked the prince, intrigued.

The lady grimaced, showing clearly her distaste for the subject:

'My brother has always had such a temper. And he has always been proud of his kind, so he never allowed King Ben to give us an inferior treatment. In the past that caused many confrontations and gave him a reputation for being an ungrateful and rebellious boy. The king even threatened to send him away but my brother didn't want to leave his family so... he was forced to hold his tongue.'

'It must have been hard.' recognized Hannibal, instinctively standing with him.

His partner sighed resignedly.

'In Westhalt we were looked over the shoulder from day one. For them, we were always the family of a foreign duke and although my mother was very well estimated and even admired as a queen, everyone thought she was lucky to have been chosen by their king.'

'Lucky?' the prince raised his eyebrows skeptically. 'Your mother was a princess. There was royal blood in her veins and, as I have heard, she was richer than her second husband.'

'Indeed, she was.' the lady nodded. 'Everyone knows that's why the king chose her. However, in the West the idea of Prince is different from the East: for them a prince from the East is nothing but a nobleman of high rank, not necessarily a member of the royal family. With that thought in mind, they act accordingly.'

'It's a stupid proceed.'

'But that's their way of thinking, my lord.'

'You and your brother... must have suffered a cause of that.'

'We have got over it years ago. Thank the gods we have our own heritage and we thought use it upon reaching the age of majority: my dowry is now committed to our marriage but William will return to Grame at the first opportunity to assume his duties as a Duke.'

'And nothing could dissuade him from it?' Hannibal asked, trying not to sound hopeful. 'Maybe if he found a reason to postpone his wish...'

'I'm afraid not, your Highness.' the lady looked at him with decision. 'My brother has spent years dreaming of his freedom: come back home, devote himself to his people and never again have to submit to our stepfather's designs. That's something he'd never give up.'

The prince knew he was telling the truth. The idea that he might abandon him at the end of the month made him feel sad because despite all their disagreements - and although at first the young man had only been a distraction for him - with every meeting between the two he had aroused more and more feelings in him: he challenged him, amused him, got him excited, sometimes made him angry... but he did not want him to leave. He wanted to know more about the boy, have the chance to explore their feelings and see where they came together. He didn't think he was just a young man with a bad temper, his behaviour during those days showed he was also intelligent and had a great resilience and courage.

He was sure his partner was beautiful inside and outside and he wanted to know him better. But he won't be able to do it if the boy left.

'I wish you stay with me.' Hannibal said, looking into his eyes. 'I would like to announce our wedding later this month. Or at least extend the period of cohabitation...'

'Milord, that's not possible.'

'I know I've been impertinent with you many times and there are several aspects of my personality that you dislike but what you have seen of me so far is not all there. I assure you. Give me a chance and I will prove worthwhile.'

'I cannot give you hope. You must understand, Hannibal.'

'Does it mean then that your decision is already made? We still have two weeks...'

'Everyone must act according to their conscience. You'll know my decision at the conclusion of the month.'

'Yes, fine.' he argued, disappointed. His rejection was painful, he had to admit. 'But since you know mine, it doesn't make sense to continue hiding it.'

'What...?'

He kissed him before he could conclude his question, taking him by surprise. He has been looking forward to do it for days, from the first night when they parted at his door. But the young man had always been so shy and unsociable with him... like a wild animal. And now this was a desperate kiss because he knew the boy was planning to leave as soon as the

minimum period of cohabitation expired. This way at least he could be granted a last whim and maybe he could stir in some way that stubborn boy's conscience...

Will deepened the kiss. Suddenly his arms were around Hannibal's neck and the prince received him with a groan, eager and pleased with his response. They embraced and before he realized, they both were on the grass. Hannibal's hands caressing under the dress a slim body, exquisitely formed. Under his chest the prince felt crushed stuffing simulating the lady's breasts and between his partner's legs the excitement was growing with every kiss. The prince delighted in exploiting it.

The young man stopped him when he tried to slide his hand between his thighs to stroke him.

'No.' he refused breathlessly. 'Leave me...' Hannibal captured in response his earlobe and sucked it in an attempt to seduce him, to make him forget all rationality. Will moaned, helpless. 'Enough, please, I cannot think...'

'You do not have to think. If you feel as I do, you must stay. Why hinder it, when we both want the same thing? Stay with me, we can rule the kingdom together...'

'Let me go.'

The tone was sharp. Will brought both forearms to form a barrier against the prince's chest and make him away from him. They stared at each other face to face. The boy's eyes showed decision, fear and desire, all at once. A cause of the passion of the moment, the veil had slightly moved and now a brown curl decorated his forehead. Hannibal felt the urge to kiss it. It seemed adorable to him.

'Is it what you really want?' the prince asked. He faced the blue gaze of his partner and smiled, satisfied. They both knew that deep down the boy wanted this as much as him and if they went forward, he eventually would surrender.

'You buffoon... scoundrel!' Will squirmed, trying to get rid of him. 'Let me go immediately or you'll receive another punch!'

Hannibal smiled even more, as if his partner's threats were loving words, and began handing affectionate kisses all over the knight's face, trying to reach his lips.

'I love your ferocity.' he declared, transported with joy.

'So try it!' Will growled and he hit him straight to the groin with his knee.

The prince lost his breath and balance, both were taken from him at once. He fell to one side, writhing in pain. Tears clouded his eyes and the pain burnt between his legs.

Will left him and ran away without thinking twice to the depths of the forest... where he got lost.

He only stopped because he couldn't run anymore. He could hardly breathe. He didn't know where he was or how much he had run.

He leaned on both knees to try to catch his breath.

It had been a complete stupidity. Everything what had happened: take that ride with Hannibal, being alone with him – he thought he could rely on his good behaviour - and allow him to kiss him. Especially that. And on top reciprocate him like that. What the hell he was thinking about!?

'You're an idiot, Will.' he chided himself, angry. 'Is that your idea of not give him hope?'

The kiss had taken him by surprise. It wasn't expected. And then it was too pleasant to resist, he wanted it. He wanted each of the caresses the prince had given him. He would have let him make love to him in the woods, if he wasn't regained his sanity at the last moment.

It was because of his smile. That arrogant and triumphant smile. His owner knew he could make him lose control and that he was so willing to give himself in his arms.

Oh, that scoundrel!

He looked around, trying to orient himself. Now he should return, look for Sarah and come back to the castle as soon as possible... preferably without Hannibal's company. After what had happenned, it would be better to put distance between them again and he hoped the prince had learned his lesson.

He went straight ahead because he could heard the murmur of water. Must have a river there, somewhere.

His suspicions were confirmed two hundred meters later. Will left the thicket of plants and trees and dropped to his knees in front of the river, bending to drink and using both hands to carry fresh water to his mouth.

After a few drinks he felt better, calmer. He was about to stand up when he felt the pressure of steel against his neck.

He froze. His eyes fixed on the water saw the presence of a man behind him. He was tall and blond, with a full beard. His clothes identified him as a man from the East. There was decision on his face and in his voice when he spoke him in Slavonic:

'Don't even think about moving, princess.'

Chapter 6

The sword was removed from his neck slowly, as the man who wielded it went back. By then most people had left the trees and Will was very aware of being surrounded, although he was unable to see his enemies.

'You can stood up now, princess.' said a female voice behind him and Will obeyed, cautiously. He turned around and saw before him a small group of people, men and women, all wearing similar chotles to those of the man who had threatened him with his sword. Among them stood a woman, tall and dressed in men's clothing. She wore her long blond hair in two braids that reached to her waist and her sapphire eyes scrutinized Will from top to bottom. After a few seconds of silence, the woman bow. 'I am Yulia, leader of Tver. It is a pleasure to meet you.'

Will watched her, not without confusion. After a moment, he spoke:

'Why your man had attacked me?' he asked, looking at her with a frown.

'I apologize for that, your Highness. It wasn't an attack. We just pretended you not to run away when you saw us.'

'I would have thought you were robbers.' he admitted, pursing his lips.

'But we're not. The Tver live here: these are our lands.'

'I had heard this territory belonged to King Carl.'

'Only on paper.' Yulia said, wincing. 'These forests once belonged to our ancestors and we have now returned. We claim our right to inhabit the lands we were seized by force in the past.'

'An understandable wish.' Will admitted. 'But I have nothing to do with it, so if you'll excuse me, I must return to the castle...'

The man's sword rose again to block his path, forcing him to stop.

'Stay where you are.' his interlocutor asked, in a friendly but firm tone that suggested an order.

'Do you dare to threaten me? Do you have any idea who you're dealing with? I am lady Alana of Grame, stepdaughter of the king of Westhalt. My partner is Prince Hannibal. If you dare to touch a single hair of my head...'

'Nobody's going to hurt you, milady, you can be quiet. My people and I just want to talk to you.'

'Talk about what?'

Yulia drew her sword. Will went back when the woman moved toward him, fearing an attack. But the girl, who was only a few years older than him, stopped a few meters from him, holding the sword with both hands in a sign of respect and submission.

'Princess, we ask your intercession in our negotiations with King Carl.'

'My intercession? What negotiations are you talking about?'

'Several months ago, we moved here. The king intended us to surrender him and offer him our loyalty in exchange for allowing us to live in these forests.'

'It's what anyone in his place would have demanded.' reflected Will. 'Why didn't you accepted the deal?'

'Because Tver not pledge allegiance to anyone who doesn't deserve it. We are proud people and don't serve anyone unless we decided. Although King Carl is now the owner of these lands, before they belonged to our people. We won't ask for permission to live in the home that belongs to us by right.'

'Excuse me but this is a territorial dispute and I have no power in it. I cannot help you to solve the problem.'

'On the contrary, princess, you are the only one who can do it.' she lowered her sword and put it in a sheath. 'We ask you convey to the king our offer: we will give our loyalty, if he leaves us settle in these lands... to his future daughter-in-law.'

Will looked at her stunned, his eyes widened.

'To me!? Do you aim I become your mistress?'

'We know who you are, milady. My people served the Novrob family in the past and that relationship was always satisfactory for both parties. If we must bow before someone, it must be before you... because we will never do before the king.'

'Yulia, you must be sensible.' Will advised her, after a pause. 'I cannot help you. The deal King Carl offers you is fair and you wont be able to get any better. If you refuse, you'll forced his Majesty to drive you out by force.'

'Then we will fight to prevent it.'

'Then there will be a slaughter. You are not a large group, right? Are these all your men?'

'There are more in the camp. Men and women, all ready to fight.'

'And to die? Are you going to drag them to death just for your pride?'

'Our pride is the only thing we have.' Yulia said angry. There was a determined expression on her face that worried Will, the type of expression that refused to admit rational advice. 'Our enemies expelled us from our lands like dogs. We have been forced to roam the woods, suffering hunger and cold, seeing ourselves dying by moments. But we are finally here: this

is our home and we will do whatever it takes to stay there. My people are used to war, milady. We have nothing to lose.'

'You cannot do things this way: subduing and threatening. It is improper and it put all of you in danger...'

'We do what is necessary.' Yulia replied, convinced. 'I'm looking for peace, milady. So I come to you for your help. We were once your servants, we can be again.'

'But I have no power to get you to stay here...'

'You're going to be the next queen. Everybody says that at the end of the month the prince is going to marry you. When that happens, it will take only a few months until Prince Hannibal officially take the crown of his father. Then you will be queen and we will be your most loyal subjects. It's a deal.' she offered. 'All you must do is assure King Carl agrees. So what you shall speak with him?'

Will was silent. The problem he faced was not trivial. A territorial dispute of that magnitude could be paid off in two simple ways: by hook or by crook. What Yulia proposed him was a long shot, could even offend the king the fact that they refused to accept his authority and instead they chose to bow to his daughter-in-law's. Not to mention he was not going to marry Hannibal, therefore he'll never become queen. It was impossible he could meet Yulia's demands...

His gaze wandered helplessly among the group members. He saw men, women and even children. All of them grouped behind their leader, trusting her and the lady who had to help them, to which they offered their loyalty and service, which was all they could offer.

After all that had happened to them, they must be surely desperate...

'I'll talk with the king.' Will agreed reluctantly. 'But I don't promise you anything. I warn you: this could result too bad for you.'

'At least we would have tried. Thank you very much for your help, milady. Now, if you'll excuse us... before you've said you ought to go back to the castle.'

'Yes, once I find the way.' he snorted.

'It's out there.' said Yulia, pointing to the river. 'Keep heading north and you will arrive soon. You are not far away. The gods keep you, my lady.'

The woman bowed again and left with her people. Will watched them for a few seconds, before snorting again and follow the direction that the leader of the Tver had indicated him.

What a Birthday! He still had not gotten rid of a problem and was already involved in another.

Dammit!

When he finally reached the lake Sarah was already there, waiting by the horses. The old maid ran to meet him, visibly worried.

'Milord! Thank the gods. Where had you been?'

'I went for a walk.' Will replied without further. He had decided not to discuss the matter with anyone but the king, it seemed the most appropriate to him.

'A walk?' the old woman looked at him puzzled. 'In the forest, you alone?'

'Where is Hannibal?' he asked, not seeing the prince anywhere.

'He departed long ago. He ordered me to wait for you.' she frowned. 'He was angry, milord. Have you argued again?'

'That doesn't matter now.' said Will, while walking toward the horses. He mounted his and went to the maid as he took the reins hard. 'Get on your horse, we return to the castle.'

'Yes, my lord.'

The old woman's eyes narrowed looking at him a few seconds before obeying. They left together and came to the castle an hour later, at a trot. Will didn't waste time and dismounted as they reached the courtyard. He handed the reins to the first servant who came to him and walked straight toward the great hall while Sarah followed him, walking as fast as she could.

They found his Majesty in the back of the room, talking to his son. Prince Hannibal looked very serious, his cheeks slightly flushed and tight-lipped. That didn't gave Will a good feeling but he ignored it to focus on more important matters.

'Your Majesty.' he called as he reached the king.

'Lady Alana.' his Majesty turned, surprised to see her. He frowned when he had the chance to look at her closer. 'Is there something wrong, milady? It seems that you've come running.'

'I've done, your Majesty. I must speak to you immediately. I beseech you give me an audience.'

'Of course. Although I'm afraid you'll have to wait a bit, milady: just now I'm going to talk to my son about an important issue...'

'No problem, father.' Hannibal intervened and turned to look at the lady with a straight face. 'Lady Alana can hear what I have to say you.'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course.' he smiled when he looked back at his father and then he cast his gaze between the lady and the king. 'Shall we?'

Definitely, there was something odd there. Will swallowed, fearing some misfortune. Hannibal seemed angry and he can imagine why.

While the three entered the king's private room, the young man began to wonder what he would have interrupted exactly, when claiming the attention of his Majesty.

What the prince wanted to discuss with his father?

'They are going to swear loyalty... to you?'

'That said their leader. And she was determined, your Majesty. Yulia and her men have nothing to lose. They must be desperate.'

The king nodded.

'They are: it is not as if they had great resources. Yulia must know I can finish them whenever I want. If I have not done until now, it is because I don't like to use violence against the homeless.' he said. 'So I tried to offer them a deal.'

'It was a good deal, your Majesty.' recognized Will. 'But I'm afraid the leader of the Tver is a proud woman.'

'And she is cunning.' the king nodded. Then he smiled. 'She's doing just what I wanted.' when the lady looked at him blankly, the king explained himself: 'My quarrel with the Tver is one of the reasons why I wish that your marriage with my son was a fact, milady. And now we have an excuse!' he exclaimed, happy.

'Your Majesty...'

'Father, no...'

'Hannibal, I won't admit any discussion: this is a matter of state.' he admonished, looking at his son with an implacable frown. 'Lady Alana and you have to marry, thus the Tver wont be a problem and we will all live peacefully and happy.'

'Your Majesty, excuse me, but I don't think that's right...'

'Do you insinuate I don't know what I'm doing?' he asked, looking at the lady with raised eyebrows.

'No, I... I understand the situation...'

'I'm glad. And I'm grateful you are going to help us to resolve it. My people will be happy to know their future queen has managed to end hostilities.'

'But I don't...'

'Don't waste your breath.' Hannibal interrupted him, placing a hand on the back of his chair. Will turned to face him and saw resignation in the prince's face, his lips tightened and his eyes with a gleam of rebellion contained. 'He is decided. No one can change my father's mind when he gets something between his eyebrows.'

'That's right.' King Carl nodded. He focused his attention back on the lady. 'You must marry my son, Lady Alana, or I'll be forced to end the Tver. I don't want to do it, I have nothing against them. This problem would have been resolved much sooner, if their leader wasn't so stubborn. Good luck what you're here to help!' he awarded him with a smile that Will didn't even want to reciprocate. The king looked at his son immediately afterwards. 'Hannibal, I think we can now address your issue: what do you wanted to talk about?'

'Nothing, father. It was about my marriage with Lady Alana but you have already decided everything in that regard.'

'And you're not going to resist, I hope.' it was a statement but it almost sounded like a threat.

'Not at all.' replied the prince and retired his hand from the chair. 'Now, if you do not mind, I have other matters to attend to.'

The king waved and Hannibal left the room. Will rose quickly from his chair and after making a quick bow to the king to say goodbye, he went immediately after the prince.

He must stop that immediately.

Chapter 7

'We need to talk.'

'There's nothing to talk about, Sir William, you have heard my father.'

'But we cannot...'

Will stopped, suddenly frozen. His brain had recorded the prince's words and suddenly a shiver ran his body up and down. He ran and intercepted Hannibal in the hallway, blocking his path to force him to stop.

'How did you call me?'

'Sir William.' the prince repeated, enunciating each syllable so that there were no doubt. He watched him funny as Will looked at him dumbfounded. 'Is not that your name? You are Sir William of Grame, Lady Alana's twin brother. Your lady costume is convincing, I admit. But it is not convince enough in short distances, you know?'

'The Lake.' Will stepped back, horrified. 'You noticed...'

'I know it from the first night.' said Hannibal. 'Honestly, you were a little bit strange lady. And the kiss confirmed it: the texture of the skin and lips of a man is different from a woman. If you have enough experience, my lord, you'll surely know.'

'You... you've known all this time and you didn't tell me anything!?' he exclaimed angrily.

'Do you want us to discuss the issue here, in the middle of the hall?' the prince set off, surrounding him. 'Let's talk in my chambers, they are close.'

Will snorted in disbelief, a second before following him. They reached Hannibal's chambers minutes later and the prince ushered the boy into his room, closing the door behind him.

'You are a scoundrel' Will said, once they were face to face. 'All this time I've gone mad pretending to be what I am not and you knew it all the time and kept the secret.' he scolded him.

'I was intrigued.' admitted the prince. 'I wanted to find out the reasons that led you to do something like that: impersonate your sister and turn yourself into my partner, why?

'I didn't do it willingly. King Ben forced me. I was against it.'

'Your stepfather planned all this?' Hannibal raised his eyebrows in surprise. 'He must be desperate.'

'He was: my sister ran off the night before we got to the castle.'

'Wow! It seems that lady Alana had the same enthusiasm for this union than me.' he joked. 'Or is there someone else, perhaps?' Will was silent and the prince was not surprised. 'You don't need to answer. Don't worry, I have no interest in knowing the identity of the lover. I don't care at all. What I want to know is what has been Lady Alana? Where she is?'

'We don't know.' said Will embarrassed, after a pause. 'My stepfather sent his deputy after them but the man hasn't found them yet.'

'They travel very fast or he is such an incompetent?'

'Sir Richard is a good soldier and has experience in tracking. I don't know what happens, he should have already found them: as long as we know, they're traveling on foot.'

'So obviously something happens.' Hannibal concluded with an expression of suspicion.

'I was going to write to Sir Richard in order to see if there have been news but my stepfather asked me to wait.'

'That's not right. Write the message to the man and I send it with my fastest messenger: in a week as much you'll know what happened.'

'Are you going to help me?' he looked at him surprised. 'Despite I have deceived you?'

'Your deception doesn't bother me, William. At the end of the day, in all this you just have been a pawn. And I have deceived you by pretending I knew nothing, so... we could say we are at peace.' he gave him a conciliatory smile. 'Also, you've heard my father: he won't allow this marriage not to be celebrated. And you don't want to be my husband, so we need to recover Lady Alana as soon as possible.'

'But she fled with her lover. By now they must be married...'

'Don't you know much about our laws, right?' he watched him with curiosity and Will looked back at him, uncomprehending. 'In Gallin no matter the sex or the number of spouses: a man can have several wives and/or husbands and the same rule applies to women. So it is not a problem that your sister is already married. She and I can reach an agreement in this regard.'

Of course. If the circumstances were favorable, what else mattered to the prince? He would get everything he needed and he didn't care about the rest.

'It would be the best.' said Will, unsmiling. 'And in relation to my deception... I apologize, your Highness.'

'It's okay. This has been the funniest thing happened to me in years.' he said, smiling.

Will nodded, pursing his lips slightly.

'If you excuse me, I must go to write to Sir Richard.' he excused himself.

He had barely taken a few steps to leave the room when the prince stopped him, grabbing his arm. He turned to look at him, surprised.

'You don't have to go away yet.'

'Your Highness.'

'William.' he said his name in a familiar, intimate tone, which caused a delicious shiver down the back of the young man. 'A moment ago, when you came up to meet my father, I was going to tell him the truth.' Will looked at him scared. 'Not to punish, but to help you: since you don't wish to be my husband and now that you are of age and your stepfather cannot prevents you from turning back to your beloved home, I thought it was the right thing to put and end to this charade. I was going to deliver you from your burden and let you go. It's what I intend to do when this is over. But before that...' he release him to stroke his face with one hand. His fingers reached his neck and the prince's thumb ran the boy's lips, his eyes watching him fondly and with desire. Will knew what that meant and he didn't stop him. 'If you don't want it, you just have to say no.'

'Milord...'

A kiss, intimate and deep, able to thwart any excuse. It was followed by another and another. Following the third, Will could not take it anymore and threw his arms around the prince's neck, drawing him to himself while he corresponded him with passion.

They moved toward the bed, taking off each other's clothes. They were naked from the waist up when they fell on the bed, embraced.

'We shouldn't do this.' said Will, returning kisses. 'If anyone finds out, we will be forced to marry or have to uncover the truth. It could cause King Ben and me many problems...'

'I don't care about King Ben.' Hannibal said, pausing a moment to look at him. 'But if you prefer, we can be discreet. It's not my intention to hurt you, William.'

'So discretion is the best.' he nodded. 'I think it's enough with the fact that I'm going to sleep with my sister's future husband.'

'Your sister is already paired. Where you see the infidelity? We don't have to deprive ourselves of anything. Games and pretend are over, William. We both want the same thing, why not get it? Or you can always deny.' he added. 'Tell me no and I will let you go. I won't bother you again. I'm not a lapdog, so I don't going to run after someone who doesn't want to be with me...'

Will took Hannibal's face in his hands to silence him with a kiss. He hugged him, making it quite clear that leaving him wasn't what he wanted at that time. The prince smiled before reciprocate and one of his hands closed avidly to catch some of his brown curls.

'Your hair is too beautiful. It shouldn't be hidden under a veil.'

'It must be hidden for now, until it's over.'

'But not when we're in private, William, okay? No veils in bed.'

'Agreed, my lord, no veils in bed.' he smiled.

'You don't have to call me milord in private. You can use my name.'

'Whatever you say, Hannibal.'

'Will...'

They continued kissing and caressing, exploring and arousing each other. When both were ready, completely naked by that time, the prince turned away from him only a moment to extract a small bottle from a nearby drawer. It contained a special oil and smelled deliciously of lavender. Hannibal used it to lubricate him, taking his time, until three of his fingers could move smoothly inside him. Then they turned the tables and the prince asked him to lubricate him, which Will did without hesitation.

They granted the necessary time to each other: first Will rode the prince and then, when both were too close, they changed their position and the boy was placed at the back of Hannibal to penetrate him from behind, as they embraced.

The climax was intense, very pleasant and achieved almost in unison. A low moan came from the prince's throat, when soon to reach the pleasure he felt his partner came inside him. He clung to the boy's hand, which was attached to his, with their fingers intertwined. He could feel his smell, his shortness of breath and the warmth of his body behind him.

He smiled, noting the chain of affectionate kisses Will dropped on his neck and shoulders. He thought that there could be no other moment as perfect as that and wished they could repeat it frequently.

He didn't want that moment to end.

The days passed quickly. Will wrote his message to Sir Richard and Hannibal sent it to Westhalt with the fastest messenger of the kingdom. Just a week after they had news and then they discovered Sir Richard had found the fugitives many days ago in a community of priests which was two days of travel from Gallin's castle... and King Ben knew it all along.

Will was furious. He was outraged and wanted to confront his stepfather but Hannibal managed to calm and convince him otherwise. They had no time for disputes: they lacked few days to conclude the month and they must convince Alana to return to the castle for the wedding.

So they began traveling that day, making people believe they went on a several days romantic getaway to the forest, not far from the lake, where the royal family owned a charming hunting lodge. Everyone saw the couple left with a smile, thinking that was another step to marriage for them.

They reached the hut two days later and after a few hours resting, they went to the community to visit Alana. One of the priests told them the cabin where the lady lived and they went over there. They knocked on her door and she opened them. She looked surprised to see her brother but some moments later she was throwing herself into his arms and hugging the young man tighly.

'Will! I'm glad you came.' she separated from him after a while. 'Do you recieved my message?'

'Yes.' the young man nodded. His face was serious. 'I came to see you, Alana, because we need your help.'

'My help? For what?'

'Can we come in? We should have this talk in private.'

'Yes, of course.' the lady agreed, after a second of confusion.

They entered the cabin, which was simply furnished with a double bed on the right and a table on the left surrounded by four chairs, a wooden bench lined on one side by a shelf full of books and a kitchen in the background.

Alana offered them a seat and brought some tea from the kitchen, which she left in front of them on the table.

'What is going on?' asked the lady to his brother, worried.

Will let out the air from his lungs and with a gesture, he indicated the man who accompanied him and who his sister a priori didn't know:

'This gentleman is Prince Hannibal.' he presented him.

'The prince!?' Alana stood up immediately, flustered. 'Your highness, I...'

'Neither explanations nor apologies are necessary, milady.' Hannibal excused her. 'Your brother has told me all. I don't hold grudges for your escape: I actually didn't want to marry you and I'm grateful you never appeared at the wedding. Don't take offense, my lady, it is clear you are a lady full of qualities. But my sights are elsewhere.'

'I understand.' Alana claimed after a moment, though she didn't understand anything at all. It was certainly confusing but better if her ex-fiance wasn't angry. That saved her and Margot any future reprisals and only left they three with a question unresolved. 'Well, why do you come here? What I am required to do?'

'We need your help with a territorial dispute.' Hannibal said.

'A territorial dispute? Forgive me, your Highness, but I don't understand.'

'Let me explain this to you, milady.'

The prince told Alana the whole story, since the problem with the Tver until her stepfather's plan to make Will supplanting her, while they gaining time to find and bring her back. Alana was surprised and looked guilt as she heard her brother's story from Hannibal. Finally, the prince told the lady the situation in which king Carl had placed them in relation to the wedding.

'So you are asking me to come back to marry you, hence you can close the deal with the Tver?'

'They have made the conditions, milady, not us.'

'But Margot and I have joined this community and also,' she raised her right hand to show both her wrist, where it remained tied a piece of red ribbon. 'Our union has also been held.'

'Gallin's laws don't forbid bigamy.' declared Hannibal, indifferent. 'And as for the community: certainly you know you can leave and return to it whenever you wish. Priests are not restrictive in this regard and I am sure they will understand our dilemma.'

'Possibly. But if I marry you I will have to give you an heir: it is what everyone expects,' she noted with serious expression. His brother also looked at the prince, slightly pursing his lips at the thought. 'I don't agree to sleep with you.' Alana said. 'And I can assure you Margot won't, either.'

'We will not need to reach that end: children can be adopted, milady. Believe me that I have no intention to share my bed with you. But marriage must be done.' he added. 'If not, there will be consequences: the Tvers could back out and then hostilities will be resume and all would end badly. My father would be forced to expel the tribe of his land and they would fight to prevent it, so the result would be a slaughter.'

'We cannot allow that.'

'Of course not.' intervened Will. 'So you must accept our plan. King Carl is determined that the marriage is celebrated. He wanted an eastern wife for his son to try to placate the Tvers and he has succeeded in it. Now he just have to seal the deal. For that we need you, Alana. Without you, everything will go to fret and the consequences for both parties will be unpleasant, at best.'

The lady looked at him shocked. She clenched his hands into fists on her lap and stood up, starting to walk to relieve her frustration and to think of something. It was her habit, so Will wasn't surprised to see her walk up and down, trying to find a solution to the problem.

'It's a tricky business.' Alana said, stopping in front of the fireplace.

'Yes, it is.' Will admitted.

The lady suddenly turned around. There was a determined expression on her face and a half smile that indicated she had found a way to fix things:

'Now I know what we're going to do.'

Will knew they could find Yulia by the lake. So they both returned with Alana to the hunting lodge where they left Hannibal - the presence of the prince could scare the tribe and that wasn't what they wanted, so the prince had to stay back and wait - and Will had to return to get their women's clothes before returning to the lake and camp there with his sister, in an attempt to attract the attention of the leader of the Tvers.

His strategy worked. Before nightfall Yulia, in the company of some of her men, showed up herself at the small camp... and then Will and Alana had to tell her the truth. The woman didn't believe them at first and she came to think this was a trap, which made her angry. Swords were about to emerge, until Alana showed Yulia the locket given to her by her mother as a child and which had a dedication to her engraved on the back and a photo of both inside.

Seeing that, the leader of the Tvers was convinced and she returned the jewel to the lady, stupefied. She looked Will up and down.

'Even being a woman myself, I haven't realized your deception.' she said, admired.

'It was not my intention to decieve anyone.'

'So that's why you insisted so much you couldn't help us: you are not going to marry Prince Hannibal.'

'I tried to warn you but couldn't reveal you the truth.'

'I understand.' she grimaced and then she turned to talk to Alana. 'In that case I transfer my offer to you, milady.'

'And I must reject it, Yulia. In return, I offer you a solution that might be the best for everyone.'

'What kind of solution?' the woman asked, frowning.

'I live in a community of priests, a few hours away from here. You can swear me allegiance and come with me and get settled there. The community's land falls within the former territory of the Tvers, am I right?'

'You're right.' Yulia nodded.

'There the land is as good as here and it wouldn't take you a long journey. You could serve me and the community. Bolsters our protection and you wouldn't have to worry about King Carl again. What do you think?' Alana asked, after giving her interlocutor a moment to think.

'It's not a bad deal.' Yulia said. She turned to her subordinates, wordlessly asking their opinion. Men in the group nodded. 'The deal is closed, milady.' she announced with a smile.

Then the woman drew her sword and offered it to Alana, in the same way she had done with Will several days earlier. This time she knelt before the lady and recited the oath of allegiance that committed to her and her people to take her as a mistress and to serve and protect her against any evil.

When the oath concluded, Will almost sighed with relief. Alana took Yulia's hand and promised to be a good lady for her and her people. Then she agreed to go with them to their camp and they came back together to the community, while Will had to mount his horse and returned to the cabin with Hannibal.

The brothers struck the small camp and parted with a hug. Will promised to come to visit Alana soon, as the month end.

As he walked away on his horse, when the figures of his sister and the Tvers had disappeared among the trees, the young man sighed thinking of what was coming: Hannibal and he had already completed their task there - not in the way they expected but still finished and satisfactorily - and now they should return to the castle.

On their return they would have to speak with king Carl. They couldn't keep hiding the truth from him.

The mere idea of that conversation intimidated him.

Chapter 8

'So you concocted this charade, you and your stepfather. You fooled us all.'

Will lowered his head at the disapproving look the king gave him. It was early in the morning and he and the prince had just arrived to the castle. The first thing they did was go to the monarch and request a private audience. King Carl has granted it to them without hesitation.

Now surely he regretted, after the surprise of seeing who he believed to be his daughter-in-law put off her veil and dress, showing that all that time she had been a man.

'It was not our intention to offend you, your Majesty.' Will apologized, while he took on the hopalande which Hannibal gave him to cover himself. 'It was serendipitous: we needed to gain time to find my sister and bring her back. I didn't even want to participate. I tried to dissuade my stepfather but he made me do it.'

'Blaming another doesn't remove the fault, Sir William.' King Carl replied, watching him angry. 'Not even when the person who is blamed is responsible for everything. You have pretended to be your sister for three weeks before the whole kingdom. You have deceived us all.'

'I was forced to do so, your Majesty.' he dared to look up to the monarch. 'I assure you it has not been a bed of roses for me, having to give up my identity to assume Alana's. I felt guilty all the time and I still feel that way. It is why I implore your forgiveness, your Majesty.'

The king pressed his lips, half appeased by his words. But apologies didn't avoid the consequences of actions:

'This nullifies the marriage contract signed with your stepfather years ago: trade and mutual protection agreements will be revoked and I demand you both repay us the dowry paid for Lady Alana, with interests. It's the least you can do to compensate us for your perfidy.'

'I myself will see to pay the price, your Majesty. Fortunately my incomes allowed me to meet the payment, which my stepfather couldn't afford, especially after the agreements between the two kingdoms were canceled.'

'Your stepfather is lucky I don't require him to give me his kingdom for this, or I will take it by force. You know I could do it.'

'We know, your Majesty. That's why we were afraid to tell the truth.'

'And why are you telling it right now?'

The boy was about to answer but Hannibal intervened. He stepped forward to come to his defense:

'I convinced him, father, Will has only been a pawn in all this. He tried to prevent his stepfather against such a deception but King Ben ignored him. I understand that his situation was hopeless,' he granted, 'but there were other options and Will tried to show them to him. It's not his fault his stepfather disregarded his wise counsel. From that moment he was forced to dress and behave like a lady, remaining silent despite his guilt, and he did all that just to save the family's honour and prevent the people of Westhalt ending up in poverty. Those are not the actions of a rogue, father, but of a loyal and kind man. A young man who has come here today to ask for your forgiveness humbly. He is repent, as you can see. He deserves your forgiveness because, among other things, you must know he has facilitated the agreement with the Tver, so that they move to the land where the community of his sister live and swear allegiance to her, as they intended. Yulia and her men will no longer be a problem for Gallin. Sir William has saved us from that.'

The monarch looked at the boy, frowning with surprise.

'Is it true what my son is saying?'

'Everything except the part of the Tver, your Majesty.' Will grimaced. 'I am afraid the prince has exaggerated a bit in that part because it was we both who seek my sister and it was Alana herself who had the idea of forging the agreement with the Tver. My merit in this matter have been much less than your son, so kindly, grants me.'

'Lady Alana has joined a community of priests?' the king asked and the young man answered with a nod. 'I assume it must be the same which is a couple of days away from here, it's the closest. And if she fled the night before your arrival, as you have told me, in a few days she would not have been able to go far... unless she was traveling in a horse.'

'They were on foot, your Majesty. She and Lady Margot.'

'Lady Margot?'

'Her lady companion. They eloped together. They have always been very close.'

'They have got married, father.' said Hannibal. 'Recently.'

The king snorted.

'Of course. There had to be someone else.' he glared at Will. 'Your sister has been a disappointment, young man. Still, what you and your stepfather have done to us is more than questionable. I should chastise you both very hard for it.'

'If that pleased you, do it, your Majesty. You are on your right.'

'Father, I don't think that's necessary.' Hannibal intervened, scowling, attracting the attention of the monarch. 'Will has confessed voluntarily and he is going to repair his fault...'

'Yes. And lady Alana has repaired hers solving the issue with the Tver. Everybody wins except king Ben, who will be ruined as our agreement was canceled. Not to mention you and

our people, my son, we have lost a queen.' he looked Will up and down. 'Perhaps Sir William should be consistent and take his sister's place beside you.'

'What!?' Will stared at the king with wide eyes.

'Father!'

'Your Majesty, it cannot be...'

'Is my son not good enough for you, Sir William?' asked the monarch, with a sardonic tone. The young man swallowed hard, aware of the sensitivity of his position. 'He is a prince. Our kingdom is one of the richest and most prosperous in the region. Anyone would think you would be lucky to marry him and of course that would repair completely the damage you have done to us...'

'Father, I won't permit anything like that.' Hannibal snapped indignantly. 'I refuse. Will wont marry me out of obligation.'

'Are you sure?'

'I am. I will not accept you make him to abide by a union of this kind: he has his own plans and must fulfill them.'

'Very well. In that case,' he looked at Will face to face before sentencing: 'Sir William of Grame, as the highest authority of this kingdom, I will condemn you to leave these lands within a week, when the period of courtship end and my son announce our people he isn't going to accept the marriage with lady Alana. The agreement between Gallin and Westhalt is officially revoked, I'll talk to King Ben personally to communicate it to him. And until you both abandon the kingdom, you will remain confined in your chambers and no one will ever talk about this matter. I forbid any of the parties involved to air the deception. That's my sentence. Now go, I don't want to see you again until the day of your departure.'

'I praise your generosity, your majesty. Thank you.' the young duke bowed and left without daring to look at the king's eyes. He was aware of having got off lightly.

'You've been a bit hard on him at the end, father.' Hannibal complained, wincing when the boy left them alone. 'It wans't necessary to talk to him in that way. He is not the real culprit here.'

'His stepfather and him are lucky to emerge unscathed from this and you know it. Any other in my place have imprisoned or executed them for their misdeed. My sentence has been magnanimous.' he defended himself. 'Now all I ask you is to be discrete during the days left for his departure.'

'Why do you ask me that?' asked the prince, frowning with intrigue.

The king snorted.

'I think it's pretty clear, my son. Especially judging by your passionate defense of the young man. If I could realize in a single conversation, others will too. You could hang a singn on the

boy's forehead that said "the prince's lover"... but I don't think it was necessary.' the king joked grimly. Hannibal looked away. 'A little discretion never hurts, Hannibal. You are a prince and you shouldn't give rise to gossip among your people.'

'I'll try, Father.'

'I hope so.' after a moment, he sighed. 'Do you really couldn't convince Sir William to accept you? Despite what he has done, it would not bother me to have him as a son. It seems clear that both of you have grown fond of each other. I think that might be a good solution to our conflict.'

'Will have another projects, father, and as I said you before he must fulfill them.'

'You're not going to do anything to convince him otherwise? Will you let him go?'

'I'll let him go because he need it. Will must clarify his ideas. He has wished to return to Grame since his mother's marriage to King Ben forced the family to emigrate. He and his sister were never happy in Westhalt: they were treated as second-class citizens when their blood is so noble or more than the king's, so back to the land of his late father is his way out. He is still very young.' the prince declared. 'He needs time and space to put things in order and I'm not one to deny him that.'

'You really love him.' noticed the king and it moved him. 'But you know that to conquer him wont be easy.'

'Only Will can decide whether he wants to be conquered or not. I will just try to convince him and be there when he finally makes his decision.'

'I wish you luck, my son.'

'Thanks, father. Can I retire now?'

'As you wish.'

The king made a gesture and the prince left the room after saying goodbye. The king sighed, thinking how much he had wished in the past that his stubborn son would find a reason to stay beside who he believed to be lady Alana and now he had, only in a way that wasn't expected.

Well, one could not have everything in life.

Just an hour after dismissing his son, King Carl found himself in the courtroom with his namesake of Westhalt.

King Ben stepped into the room carefree because he knew nothing of the meeting held between his stepson and the king. He couldn't imagine what was coming. When he stood before his host, the West monarch bowed his head respectfully to greet him.

'Good morning, your Majesty. Have you sent for me?'

'That's right. I'd like to talk to you.'

There was some sharp quality in his voice that made King Ben look at him strangely.

'Is there any problem, your Majesty?' he asked cautiously.

'Indeed.' King Carl nodded. He stood to face him in a way that set off the alarms in the brain of his namesake. 'Your Majesty, I will be brief because I don't want this discussion to last too much: I know by witnesses who I completely trust that you have been lying to me all this time.'

'What are you talking about? Lying to you, me? I never would run like that against you, your Majesty: we are neighbours. And at the end of the month we will become family...'

'No way. That marriage will not take place.'

'What!?' he looked at the king dumbfounded. Did he gone mad? 'Your Majesty, that's impossible...'

'This morning my son and your stepson, Sir William, came to talk to me. By your expression, I guess you get an idea of the topic that was discussed in the conversation.'

King Ben had just run out of words. That couldn't be possible. Had his stepson really told the truth? And how the prince knew the truth? Has Will told him or he had discovered alone?

Whatever it was, now he must save the head. If this was the situation, then he had to avoid himself to end up on the gallows or the dungeons. Certainly, William has done the dirty on him...

'Your Majesty, I assure you...'

'You can make up any excuse to defend you, your Majesty, but we both know what the truth is. I can see it in your face. You have disappointed me.' he said, watching him outraged. 'Deeply, I must admit. I thought you were an honourable monarch and you have deceived me, besides forcing your stepson to help you in your misdeed.'

'I urge you to ignore what that boy have told you, your Majesty: he is fractious and quarrelsome. For years he have caused me many problems because he has never acknowledged any authority. He is a rebel and I can add he is a liar too.'

'The only liar in this room is you.' King Carl replied. The king pressed his lips in disgust to look at him. 'I regret having had the idea of joining our families. So, because of your deception, our agreement is revoked: marriage will not take place, you'll have no access to our trade routes and the dowry delivered up on behalf of your stepdaughter will be fully

refunded to the girl, since this is greater old and we know where is the community she has joined.' King Ben was aware of the tic in his cheek when his host mentioned the community: if he really knew so much, then there was no point. He was done. 'As for the dowry that my kingdom paid for the princess... you're lucky Sir William has agreed to pay it with his own incomes. That will give to your kingdom some relief.'

'Your Majesty, I ask you to be lenient. I implore your forgiveness...'

'Is it not enough for you that at this stage you haven't been jailed or executed? I'm being magnanimous because I am not a cruel man. It is punishment enough for you and your people having to pay the consequences of your fault. It pains me to do it but I cannot ignore such an affront: my sentence is you remain confined to your chambers until the month ends and then you will leave the kingdom for good. At that time my son will announce he is not going to marry lady Alana... and we all will keep your deceit in secret because I will not consent you to leave my son and me as fools before our subjects. At the end of the day, it isn't in your best interest let this get out.' King Carl said and his namesake couldn't help but agree with him. 'No noble would want to do business with you, knowing what you are capable of. Your situation is already bad enough. I don't want or need to hurt you more. You had best leave without fuss, otherwise you will have to face the consequences. Do I make myself clear?'

'Yes, your Majesty.'

'Now, go away. I don't want to see you again.'

'Thank you for your compassion, your Majesty.'

He turned and left. He closed the door behind him and had to wait a moment before came back to his chambers because reality hit him too hard to move.

He was done. His kingdom had no future without those trade agreements with Gallin. How he would settle his debts now, when he couldn't even count with Grame's incomes, which had ended up in the hands of his stepson, since he had come of age?

Damn kid... he knew someday he would ruin him! From the first moment he had given him problems, with his sullen attitude and his impertinent little nose always raised. He was going to preserve his heritage and to return the dowry the prince and his father had paid for Alana, while he himself, having made every effort to benefit his people and save them from poverty, he gained nothing.

He had been a good king for years and so they paid him. Bloody ungrateful, pompous...

He walked down the hall, furious. He would pay the consequences because he has no choice. But before that, he would find his stepson and put him firmly in his place.

He was entitled to obtain satisfaction for what that devil had done to them, him and his kingdom.

Chapter 9

The horses were moving side by side on the forest path. It was a sunny, cloudless day with a pleasant temperature: the day of Will's departure.

The previous week had been too long for the two... and not too nice. Except for the moments they had spent together, everything else had been insufferable. And to make matters worse, they had had an altercation with King Ben... or rather they might say the monarch had had an altercation with Will.

King Ben was furious about the break-up of contract and he had faced his stepson for it, blaming him for his misfortune. It got really bad between the two and the monarch had been about to hit the young man in a fit of rage... but Hannibal was there and he had managed to stop the king before he did something unforgivable.

The prince put his Majesty firmly in his place, leaving it clear he would be responsible for applying him the just punishment, if he ever again take revenge on his stepson... since then neither Will nor him had seen the king and when they met in the yard that morning – they had agreed Hannibal would accompany the boy to the crossroads at the exit of the kingdom - they was told that the king and his entourage had departed at dawn, just two hours earlier.

Will had breathed relief: the last thing he desired was cross paths with his stepfather during his trip.

At that time, both young men reached the crossing and they stood beside the tall pole indicating three different directions. They were silent for several seconds, looking at the three paths that opened before them, until Will broke the silence with a sigh:

'Well, here we're.'

'Yes.'

Silence again. They looked at each other and the two made an effort not to stare at each other's eyes. They had to look away, buring the memories of the last days - especially those concerning the night before: their last night together - and the feelings that flooded them as they face their farewell.

'Are you sure this is what you want to do?' Hannibal asked, drawing the attention of the young man. 'I don't mean to pressure you but you know we could turn around and...'

'I'm sorry.' Will shook his head. 'I told you I want to go home and that's really what I want. The last few weeks with you have been marvellous but everything else... well... I'd rather forget it, that's all.'

'I understand: if you add it all, the experience hasn't been very nice to you.'

'Absolutely. Except the moments I have spent with you in recent times.'

Hannibal smiled, touched by his words.

'Within a few months, or perhaps a few years, you'll look back and laugh at all this.'

'I hope so.' Will smiled back shyly. 'I'll miss you, Hannibal.'

'Me too. Maybe we could write each other, after a while? If you agree, of course.'

'Of course. It will be good that at least a friendship came out of this.'

'Actually, it came out much more than a friendship, if I may remind you, my dear Will.'

'Thanks but I'm sure I don't need a reminder, my dear Hannibal.' he joked sarcastically.

They looked at each other and none of them were encouraged to talk about what they felt, although both wished to do deep down. Will was the first to break eye contact. He sighed, fingering nervous the reins of his horse.

'I must leave.' he said, pursing his lips with a determination he didn't feel. 'The road to Grame is long and...'

Hannibal hugged him. He simply leaned back in his saddle to reach the boy, surrounding him with his arms, and the young Duke at first didn't know what to do. After a moment he reciprocated and buried his head in the gap between the shoulder and the neck of the prince, who held him against his body all he could without both faced danger of falling from their horses.

'I was delighted to be with you, Will.' confessed Hannibal, honest. 'I really rather you don't leave.'

'I'd want to stay.' admitted the boy. 'But I must serve my people. It is time that the Duke of Grame return to his lands.'

'Good luck. I wish you the best. Indeed I have grown fond of you. You know I'd marry you without hesitation... if you could accept me.'

Will separated from him. He pushed him away carefully, so the prince doesn't think that was a blatant rejection of his proposal. He didn't want to offend him, he just...

'I'm fond of you so much too.' he said and his partner knew it was true, he saw it in his eyes. 'But now I must go. Goodbye, Hannibal.'

'Goodbye, Will.'

The duke went underway. He left without looking back, feeling the prince's eyes pinned on his back like an arrow in the center of the target. He wanted to go back and he didn't because that would have given his partner hopes he couldn't allow himself to give him. He had already made his decision and he would comply with it. It wasn't like them to not see each other again. Maybe in the future, if they started a correspondence and friendship arose, they could spend some time together... perhaps there was still a little hope for them.

Hannibal saw his partner disappear into the woods and after long seconds stopped at the crossing, he made his horse turn around and came back to the castle.

That was the end of an chapter in his relationship with Will... but it wasn't nearly their final.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

> Another story ended and another farewell. This is always a bittersweet moment: when you're happy to have finished but at the same time sad because the fic was completed. I hope you enjoyed it as much as me. Thank you very much to all who have read, commented, bookmarked and gave Kudos to this story. I hope to see you all on the next adventure ;)

The ladies were picking apples in the yard when they saw him coming on his horse.

'Prince Hannibal!' Alana said, looking at him stunned.

'Your brother has invited him?' Margot asked, standing beside her, curious.

'Maybe.' Alana left her basket down and made a nod to her wife to follow her. 'Come with me.'

The redhead left her basket beside her partner's and went after her. Both came to the young rider at the time he handed the reins of his stallion to one of the servants.

'Your Highness!' Alana greeted him, bowing when they both reached him.

'Lady Alana.' Hannibal smiled and greeted her with a nod. 'I'm glad to see you again, are you visiting your brother?'

'Yes.'

'And I assume this lovely lady is Lady Margot.' Hannibal said, turning to watch the slender redhead standing next to the lady. 'It's a pleasure to meet you at last, my lady. How are you?'

'I'm fine, your Highness, thank you.'

Past the formalities, the prince turned back to Alana:

'Will...?'

'He went fishing early this morning. He must be about to return: it is almost lunchtime. You must join us at the table, your Highness.'

'It will be an honour.' he smiled. 'Thank you for your hospitality, milady.'

'I just do what my brother would do. If you desire, we can... oh, Will!'

They all turned around and watched the duke, who had just made his entry into the courtyard. The young man saw the three and his horse stopped suddenly, not far from where the others were.

The Duke looked flustered at the prince.

'Hannibal.'

'Will.'

'I thought it would take you a few days to arrive: I wasn't expecting you so soon.'

'The roads are excellent in Summer and that has saved me a few days... or maybe my desire to see you again made me spur my horse to go faster.' he confessed with a smile that made his host blush.

'You have always been a joker.' absconded the young man, smiling nervously as he got off the horse to meet them.

'Can we talk privately, your Grace?' asked Hannibal and Will nodded.

'Follow me to the garden, please.' he told him.

Both men said goodbye to the ladies and they walked away across the yard, walking side by side. From afar, Margot and Alana watched them. The redhead frowned slightly, before turning to look at her wife.

'Do you think the prince is going to propose to Will?' she asked, curious.

'To propose?' Alana looked at her surprised. 'Margot, as long as I concern, Prince Hannibal and my brother have just been exchanging correspondence over the past year.'

'But Will has invited him to his house. Sure he is going to spend here a period. Have you not noticed how they looked at each other? There is something between them, Alana.'

'Well...' the lady hesitated. 'Yes, I admit it seems the prince is interested in my brother.'

'And he's not the only one: Will blushed when his Highness has spoken of his desire to see him again and I'd swear he has been about to fall from his horse, when he has seen him.'

'Margot, I think you're overreacting.'

'Oh, really? Then I think we must investigate.'

'Margot, no...'

The redhead ignored her protests and dragged her by hand across the yard to the garden. They approached carefully so as not to be discovered by the young men, who were sitting on a stone bench in front of a fountain.

Alana and Margot hid behind some bushes to discreetly spy on the couple and they saw them talking but couldn't hear exactly what they said. However, both the duke and the prince were sitting very close and judging by the attitude of both, it was clear that their relationship was close.

Alana gasped in surprise when suddenly she saw the prince take out of his pocket a red ribbon. Not that the mere presence of a ribbon was surprising, is that his Highness offered it to his brother and when he accepted, Hannibal tied the ribbon around his right wrist as he spoke words that could only be marriage vows. When he finished, the prince cut the ribbon in half with his dagger and handed it to Will, who repeated the ceremony with him. The young men sealed their union with a kiss.

The lady turned and looked at her wife shocked and excited.

'I told you.' Margot smiled, pleased.

'You were right.' Alana scowled for a moment. 'Do you think there was something between them while my brother lived in Gallin, or all this has arisen from their letters?'

'Both possibly. Of course it is clear the prince and your brother are known each other very well...'

The kiss between men became more passionate. To the extent that Will ended up on his husband's lap and when the caresses began to became intimate, the ladies had it clear:

'This just became a private scene.'

'Yeah, we'd better leave. Let's give privacy to the newlyweds.'

They walked away discreetly. Behind them remained the lovers, concentrated on each other and oblivious to anything else other than their bodies and their feelings: it was the first time they had seen in a year and had been months since Hannibal thought it was appropriate to write the first letter, and even more since Will allowed the prince to start court him. They were long months of effort and dedication to conquer the young Duke, who had finally surrended to his own feelings and that was the result.

Will clung to his husband as he kissed him with passion, while Hannibal slid both hands down his back in a caress. The sunlight over them seemed to smile, lighting up the garden and reflecting in the fountain's water, highlighting among all colours the red ribbons that was going to adorn the wrists of the men forever.

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